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Seasonal

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Seasonal



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Thanksgiving Thoughts



“One of the most touching and edifying acts to be seen in the Church is gratitude,” said Saint Vincent. “Nothing more completely wins the heart of God than gratitude.” So, “we should spend as much time in thanking God for his benefits as we spent in asking him for them.”

The absence of gratitude, on the other hand, renders a person “unworthy of receiving any benefit either from God or men.” To the saint, ingratitude is “the crime of crimes.”

As a man who was the beneficiary of so many gifts from God for his charities (by way of human donors) and who consistently depended on others’ generosity to maintain his work, Vincent was aware of the cycle of generosity that gratitude perpetuates. Nothing stayed in his hands very long, and when they seemed empty, his thankfulness drew down more abundance.

There was, too, a reverse generosity in his spirit. “If we are very grateful for the charities that have been extended to us, we shall always be disposed to repay voluntarily to our benefactors the favors they have bestowed on us, if it is in our power to do so.” This graciousness appeared in many instances in which the saint did extend himself to benefactors in some kind of need. In acting thus, he claimed, he was doing nothing more than “to return to our benefactor in his need, what he has given to us in his abundance.”

“Is it not just for a servant of God to inconvenience himself for charity and for gratitude?”

November, 1989

Time and Providence



On New Year's Eve, "Father Time" is hooted off the world's stage as if he were the villain of the universe. To Saint Vincent, however, the old gent appears in another light, not so much an adversary to be scorned as an ally to be embraced.

Vincent was sensitive to the criticism that he sparked because of his delay in making some decisions. Although occasionally apologetic for his tardiness, the saint was most often firm in asserting his belief that time was on the side of providence. To a superior who was pressing him for quick action, he wrote, "...You will object that I take too long, that you sometimes wait six months for an answer that can be given in a month and that, meanwhile, opportunities are lost and everything stands still. To that I shall answer, Monsieur, that it is true that I take too long in answering and in doing things; still, I have never yet seen any affair spoiled because of my delaying, but everything has been done in its time and with the necessary foresight and precautions...."

"Shall I tell you something without blushing, Monsieur?" the saint goes on. "It is that, reflecting on all the main events that have taken place in this Company, it seems to me...that if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say that of all of them without excepting a single one. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable providence of God step by step. And my only consolation is that I think our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company."

In the end, Vincent asserts, God is "greatly honored by the time we take to weigh with mature deliberation matters having to do with his service, as are all those with which we deal."

January, 1990

June Thoughts in May



Traditionally, June is decked out as the month of weddings. For many people it is doubly festive, for it is also the month of ordinations. It marks the joyful culmination of the years of preparation by the young men (and older) whose lives have been directed toward the priesthood. The occasion likewise brings a sense of achievement to their seminary mentors, their families and friends who have nurtured them on their journey.

The education of the clergy is one of the glories of Vincent de Paul. He stood at a moment in history when the ecclesiastical state was so devalued that the work of reform and evangelization could not proceed effectively without an informed, worthy and zealous priesthood. For this reason he steered his labors in every direction that would foster priestly life: toward the participants in the Tuesday Conferences, the ordinands on the threshold of orders, the ill-prepared priests ripe for re-education, and in time toward those in need of an extended program of priestly training. Moreover, he rejoiced that he was not alone, that his contemporaries — Berulle, de Condren, Olier — came to emulate the example of “our little functions,” as he called his work.

Vincent was awed by the responsibility that the times had thrust upon him. “Who can comprehend the dignity of this employment?” he marveled. “It is the loftiest that there can be.” However unworthy he felt, he was not overwhelmed by the prospect, because “God has conferred the honor on this Little Company.” Hence it is necessary to undertake it with “all care and attention.”

Knowledge, of course, is essential in formation, but example is equally important. Because of previous education, some ordinands and clerics at the Tuesday Conferences, Vincent remarked, are won over “not by science or the beautiful things that will be said to them...but rather by the virtues which are practiced here...Let us be humble and submissive, bearing in mind the dignity of this employment of helping to make good priests...” If surprised that God has chosen

us for “such a great work,” we need only remember that “he makes use of the humblest materials for his extraordinary operations..., as he does in the sacraments, where he employs water and a few words to confer his greatest grace.”

After seeing the custom in seminaries other than his own, Vincent came also to believe in the leaven of practice in ministry, “as there is no better way of learning than to see how a thing is done.” For this reason he was concerned to have his seminary associated with a nearby parish in order to initiate the students in all the works of the ministry. Moreover, he did not hesitate to send advanced students on the mission, at least for some time.

Vincent always returned to a basic principle that priestly formation, like charity, begins at home. “It is not enough,” he says, “to teach the ordinands chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology; the chief thing is to form them to true piety and devotion. And to that end we should first of all be filled with it ourselves, for it is almost useless to instruct them without giving them an example. We should be fountains, filled to overflowing, so as to pour forth without exhausting ourselves; and we ourselves should possess the spirit with which we desire them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not possess.”

May, 1990

Vincentian Springtime: The First Days of Creation



Folleville

25 January 1617

A glow suffuses the story of the beginnings of the Congregation of the Mission and radiates the freshness of something new and hopeful. Vincent himself apparently carried this feeling throughout his life, for he readily repeated the tale to anyone who would listen. Now, as late as two years before his death, in the conference that accompanied the distribution of the *Common Rules*, he wonders still at the exciting days of the Congregation's birth. The occasion triggers memories of the simple events that had such far-reaching consequences: Vincent's exhilaration from the confession of the unknown penitent and its aftermath; the flood of confessions consequent upon his sermon; the trust shown in leaving the key of the house with a neighbor and in asking him to sleep in the bed; the one sermon Vincent preached (on the fear of God) which he admitted that he would "turn in a thousand different ways."

As his memory roamed over those early days, the fire is rekindled in recalling their remarkable effects: "Such was our manner of acting, when some ecclesiastics, seeing the blessings that God bestowed on our labors, asked and obtained permission to join us." In the recollection of the numerous works that flowed from the events there is wonder at the unexpectedness of it all: there is Monsieur Portail, "who can tell you that nothing was further from our thoughts than all this...[Indeed] Monsieur Portail never thought of it; I myself was quite so far from thinking of it; all this was beyond our hopes."

The moment and the memory cast their spell. In distributing the rules, which crystallized four decades of the missionaries' lives, Vincent feels a kinship with Moses the lawgiver, "who promised to those who observed the law a thousand blessings in all things." Or, as the recorders of the occasion remarked, "All imagined they were with the apostles at the moment when our divine redeemer, in addressing them his last words, gave them likewise his rules while he communicated to them the beautiful precept of charity, 'My command is this, that you love one another, as I have loved you.'"

The saint's mellowness is evident as he spoke to his missionaries, "in a middle tone of voice, full of sweetness and unction, which caused the hearts of all who heard him to feel the paternal affection which filled his own breast." Nor was Vincent forgetful of his old companion of those days, whom he invited to be among the first to receive his copy of the rules: "Come, Monsieur Portail...come, you who have always borne with my infirmities; may God bless you."

These glowing moments that Vincent experienced are his alone and incapable of repetition. Unique as they were, they can, nevertheless, be cherished as family heirlooms, not consigned to the attic but given a place of prominence in the missionaries' hearts, to offer them and succeeding generations an enduring sense of the hope and the promise that were present at the creation of the Company. Vincent's memories are a window in which to view, in imagination, a springtime which once blossomed, but beneath which lies a grace ever ready to burst anew upon the Congregation, to give it a freshened share of abundant life.

January, 1991

Vincent and First Communion



In this season of first communions it is instructive to turn to a letter of Vincent that throws light on one of the saint's practices in conducting missions. That is, to provide solemnity for children's first communions. Written to a missionary on the site of a mission in progress, the letter offers Vincent's advice to the harried priest, who seems to be having trouble with the pastor.

A professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris, Abbé Villicien, was of the opinion that Saint Vincent was the first to introduce the custom of solemnizing first communion.

Monsieur,

The grace of our Lord...

I was consoled to see in your letter that the pastor has relented a little in his determination not to allow children's communion. I hope he will give in completely once you take care to point out to him: (1) that we are bound to this by our Rules; (2) that it has always been done this way in all the missions we have given; (3) that the children are well instructed and in a state to prepare well for communion, which serves them later to make other communions well; (4) that this is one of the principal means we have to reach older persons, whose hearts are obdurate and hardened, and who allow themselves to be won over by the devotion of the children and the care that is taken with them. With regard to this, I have learned from Genoa that the cardinal-archbishop is so attached to children's communion that he is there for most of them and weeps with emotion as if he were a child himself. Lastly, our experience with the blessing God bestows on this act should serve as a motive to the pastor to give his approval to it in his own parish.

If he says he wants to do it himself and that he will instruct them during

Lent so that they can receive communion at Easter, you could reply to him that he will do a much better job of it than we, that is true, but what we will do will not prevent him from doing the same thing then. If he is afraid that we might admit to communion children who may not be adequately prepared and do not have the other dispositions necessary, please tell him that it is our custom to examine them all in presence of the pastors who will judge for themselves whether or not they should be allowed to receive this sacrament, and the pastor could put off to another time those he does not find ready. Lastly, if he objects to the solemnity of the procession, we shall make it as simple as possible, without show and without dressing up some of the children like angels, as is done in certain places. I do not think we can oppose him in that.

So please explain all these things clearly to him, and I hope he will give you full liberty in this regard; otherwise, we shall consult the Company to see whether it is advisable to continue the mission without this communion....

(Letter no. 897. The original has been damaged to a point where surmises have been made in reconstructing words and phrases. Those textual marks have been omitted here.)

May, 1991

Vincent de Paul's Joyeux Noel



One will look in vain for “Christmas-y” sentiments from Vincent de Paul. In his letters and conferences to the missionaries he rarely adverts either to the presence of the feast of the Lord’s Nativity or to the mystery that the feast celebrates. Much less are there any traces of seasonal greetings.

True, there is the occasional exception, as in his letter to the superior at Turin, Jean Martin, which Vincent ends with a nod toward the season, praying that in “the mystery that draws near of the savior who emptied himself under the figure of a child we can find ourselves at the crib to be drawn to follow Jesus in his abasement.” Also, later in life, in three letters written on the same day, the saint designates the date *ce jour de Noel 1658* but with no other reference to it in the letters. Similarly, another letter, written to Bernard Codoing, has a specific date of 25 December 1642 but makes no allusion to the day on which it was written. It was a note concerned with serious community business that could have been written on any day.

More often there are no references at all. One passing nod, hardly “Christmas-y,” appears in remarks that Vincent made at a community “Repetition of Prayer,” responding to the previous remarks of a seminarist about conflicting feelings he experienced. Vincent reassured the young man that Jesus himself had such fluctuations, which the saint illustrates with examples from Jesus’ life, extending from his birth through his death and glorification. Of the season, Vincent offers New Year’s greetings as the year winds down, even though the date is Christmas Eve. The same absence of allusions is evident in conferences given in the vicinity of Christmastide.

Although Vincent himself rarely speaks in a seasonal vein, some of his correspondents reflect their awareness of the time. For instance, Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, in a letter of December, 1636 opens with the greeting, “I entreat the divine Infant of Bethlehem to fill your soul abundantly with the graces and blessing

of His holy Nativity.” And Saint Louise, in the same year, writes about establishing a confraternity at the parish of Saint-Étienne in Paris, and tells him: “The pastor greatly desires it, and he thought it advisable that [two Ladies of Charity] take up the collection for that purpose *on these holy days* (emphasis added), which they have done.”

It is not fair to put expectations on Vincent that reflect our own customs. But he rarely alludes even to the liturgical event that Christmas celebrates. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Vincent ignores the reality that gives Christmas its meaning, viz. the Incarnation. For him that theme is not just seasonal but runs year long, minus any seasonal coloring, and through all of his utterances. Jesus is prominent in them, but mainly with examples from his public life. It is indeed a major thrust of Vincent’s spirituality: As Jesus embodied himself in human life, so the missionary is to incarnate Jesus in his own life.

A compact and coherent source in which to trace this emphasis are the *Common Rules* of the Congregation. This document, thirty years in the writing and in the living, is representative of Vincent’s incarnational vision that colored the mode of life he proposed for his Congregation. In his introduction to the rules Vincent states at the outset that he has based them, where possible, on “the spirit and actions of Jesus Christ.” “My idea,” he goes on, “was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted. They should have the same spirit that he had, and follow in his footsteps.”

Thus Vincent begins each chapter with the example of Jesus Christ as the model of the missionary in all facets of life. The saint follows through in his conferences with further elaborations on this theme. At bottom is a call to personal holiness, “to imitate [Christ’s] virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others.” These virtues and the evangelical counsels are indeed the characteristic marks for the missionaries. Or stated another way, the member’s responsibility is “to put on the spirit of Christ,” a priority is to “seek first the kingdom of God...to carry out God’s will in all circumstances and at all times,” motivated as Jesus was, “always to do what pleases the Father.”

This attitude that nourished personal holiness also reached into the external activities of the missionaries. Thus, after the example of Jesus who gave directions to his disciples for getting along with each other (and with others outside the Congregation as well), Vincent directed that his own disciples live in a spirit of “love, like that between brothers...as well as the bond of holiness.” Similarly, the example of Jesus served as model for the various spiritual practices of the Congregation. It is the pattern, too, for dealing with the sick, for behavior in conducting missions, and in whatever other ministries the Congregation sponsors.

Although Vincent did not send many Christmas greetings as we know

them, he was never far from the mystery that Christmas celebrates. Indeed, he made the Incarnation a central focus of the life of his Congregation. In this way the meaning of Christmas is kept alive, not through one season alone, but throughout the whole year — Vincent's own way of saying JOYEUX NOEL!

December, 1992

Vincent and Louise: The Last Days



A tender thread runs through the narrative of Vincent's and Louise's last days in 1660 that further defines their relationship. Although both stood on the threshold of death — Louise would die on 15 March, Vincent on 27 September — they seemed more solicitous about the fragile condition of each other than about themselves.

Louise would be the first to die, but Vincent's health is foremost in her mind, where she pictures him painfully immobilized at Saint-Lazare. Closing many of her letters during these weeks, she invariably asks her correspondents to pray for Vincent in his illness, which restricts his movements in getting around, to the point of depriving him of opportunities for celebrating mass.

She expresses this concern to Vincent himself in the few extant letters. In one message she says that she is sending him some devotional objects, such as "this Jesus surrounded by thorns...a medal that [a] good young woman who was here during her illness sent me, along with the chaplets, after she returned [home]." In the same letter she asks news of his health: "Is the swelling in your legs increasing? Are you in less pain? Do you have any trace of fever?" There are even some health tips: "As a sick person you must take some nourishment in the evening, but not bread or wine. Herbs have an unpleasant taste, but they build good blood. Cornachin powder — 18 or 21 grains only — is very good occasionally for children and old people. It does not upset the system and it draws off fluids without leaving the body dehydrated."

In spite of her filial concern, she is capable of needling him for what looked like stubbornness, as when she wrote him, for instance, around the same time: "Permit me, my Most Honored Father, to inquire about your ailments which I

believe could be relieved if you would allow yourself to be treated as your charity would command someone else to be treated....”

Louise’s anxiety about Vincent’s absence did contain a measure of self-interest. She felt deprived of his company and counsel for several reasons. She needed him for her own reassurance and she looked to his advice about the Company of the Daughters. She consoled herself by the reminder that this anxiety and suffering were good for her growth. In one letter she touches all of these issues: “From time to time, I feel strongly the pain of the state to which your charity has reduced you as well as the suffering of being deprived of the honor of speaking to you. Since I am still the same, I am afraid that my cowardice, self-love and the other threats to my salvation may profit from this situation. As I reflect upon the present condition of the Company, I also worry about no longer being able to discuss matters with you. I am afraid that reading my letters imposes a burden upon you....” She then goes on to write about her particular fears for the Company.

The records of Vincent’s communications with Louise at this time are scarce. He, too, remembered her in his correspondence, as in this letter to Mathurine Guerin, to whom he wrote on 3 March. After alternating between fear and hope about Louise’s condition, he says, “She [Louise] is suffering greatly, as you may imagine, and although no longer feverish, she is not, for all that, out of danger on account of her age [almost 69 years] and feebleness. Everything that can be done is being done to preserve her, but that lies with God, who having preserved her for twenty years contrary to all human expectations, will continue to preserve her in so far as it may be expedient for his glory....”

At the end Vincent still was unable to visit Louise in person, but he sent a message to comfort her. His words showed some awareness of his own fate: “You are the first to set out; if God forgives my sins, I hope soon to rejoin you in heaven.”

Vincent ultimately had the last word. Although he was unable, in her final moments, to visit Louise in person, he was alert enough in July to preside at two conferences with the Daughters (3 and 24 July). Thankful to God for sparing him up to this point and for the opportunity to address this group once more, he regretted his prolonged absence from them. Like Louise, he said, “I too was suffering from an illness which weakened me considerably...[but] it was God’s good pleasure that all should have happened in this way and, in my opinion for the greater perfection of the person of whom we are now going to speak, I mean Mademoiselle Le Gras.”

Vincent calls his words a “conference...on Mademoiselle Le Gras,” its topic “the virtues you have observed in her and which of those virtues you would wish to imitate.” It is hardly a conference in the usual sense. Rather, it is an interactive exercise in which he asks some leading questions and opens the floor for the sisters to respond in ways that would help them to express their grief, and to articulate for

themselves the meaning Mademoiselle had for them. This becomes another way in which Vincent directs attention from himself and focuses on his collaborator and friend.

At the end of the second of the conferences, and after the sisters had the chance to express themselves, Vincent, ever the pragmatist, announces: "However, we must proceed to the election of a superioress in place of Mademoiselle Le Gras. And where shall we find her among you, sisters?"

Thus, with Louise gone and Vincent himself soon to go, he looked to the future. However, even at the end the saint allowed no self-absorption but faced the end with characteristic detachment. "Do not be scandalized if I am doing nothing to show I am preparing for death," he told a fretful attending confrere. "I have never gone to bed for the last eighteen years without placing myself in a state to appear before God before morning."

March, 1993

What's in a Name?



“*T*he name Missionaries, or Priests of the Mission, clearly indicates that the work of missions is the primary and most important of all ministries to people. And we did not invent this name for ourselves, but popular usage, reflecting divine providence, gave it to us.”

With this assertion in the *Common Rules* Vincent spoke his mind about the most acceptable name to identify his confreres according to their works. Because it was a designation whose usage both providence and the people sanctioned, it was not to be taken lightly.

That this was no abstract concern was evident in 1651-1652 when Vincent had occasion to complain about the use of the name “missionaries” by other congregations or individuals. (Even Father Olier was ready at one time to change his congregation’s title of “Priests of the Community of Saint Sulpice” to that of “Priests of the Mission.”) In a letter that lays out the saint’s concern he notes the existence of several such groups that are using that name for themselves. One of these was a congregation proposed as “Missionaries to the Indies” and sponsored by the Duke de Ventadour, a canon of Notre-Dame, “a very fine man.” Indeed, Vincent indicates that he himself has “nothing to say against the nature of the thing, which is good and praiseworthy. On the contrary, we should be very glad that there are men who give themselves to God to serve him in this way.” However, the saint continues in the letter to (probably) Achille Le Vazeux, assistant in the house at Rome, whom Vincent called upon to represent the Company’s interests to the Holy See, “It is advisable to prevent them, if possible, from being called ‘Missionaries,’ pointing out the inconveniences that arise when two or several different companies have the same name. Please make it clear that this confusion of names is very prejudicial to us. We have had only too great experience of it.”

That experience goes beyond simple confusion of names. What Vincent had in mind were instances when his own Congregation suffered from the sins of

others with similar titles. Thus, speaking of Monsieur Authier's "Company of the Blessed Sacrament for Missions" — a community similar to his own and at one time desirous of merging with the Congregation of the Mission, but now under a cloud for political intrigue — Vincent said, "We thought we could be expelled from Annecy, especially since they are at the College des Savoyards in Avignon against the will of the people. The latter, thinking that we and they were one and the same congregation, turned against us and, in the heat of things, tried to drive us out of their region." There was even a fear — fortunately never to materialize — that because "the Chambry Senate has even refused absolutely our foundation...I think that, in the end, we will have to leave Savoy."

Another example concerns a priest who went to the Lyons hospital and was so dissatisfied with its management that he advised the cardinal of Lyons to end the disorder. "Since he signed the letter 'priest of the mission,'" Vincent said, "this good prelate took it that he was one of our men, although it was not so. He complained about this everywhere and attacked us for it. I went to see him and gave him clear proofs that this priest was not a member of our Company, but he was never willing to believe it. Ever since then, he has thought badly of us."

"Here is a third example. Some time ago the bishop of Beziers asked us for a few priests to work in his diocese. A priest who had lived with us, whom we had sent away because he had a weakness for wine, learned of this. He went to see this bishop, saying that I had sent him. The bishop welcomed him and put him to work, but he recognized soon after that he was a drunkard and, from that time on, lost any esteem he had for the missionaries."

Fortunately, the hazard of identical names was recognized by some persons in authority. One such was the chancellor of Paris, who, Vincent said, "had clearly foreseen this, for when the bull for Monsieur Authier's establishment was presented to him for the king's authorization, he flatly refused, without my saying a word or having anyone else mention it. He said that there was already a Congregation of Missionaries in France. Since God has been pleased to bestow a certain blessing on ours, new societies desiring to do what we do are happy to take our name as well. Thus, the faults of others will fall on us, and ours will be blamed on them. Also, it is no use to say that the Company will be called 'Mission for the Indies' because ours is also for the Indies, as well as for elsewhere. Do not the Jesuits and other religious communities send people there also? However, they are distinguished by their own name and not by 'the Mission.'"

Although "that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet," Vincent, in his case, had to be more concerned than that about the question, "What's in a name?" He was always open-minded about God's work and had felt that, as long as it was done, it mattered little who was the agent. In fact, the saint complained to the superior, Jean Dehorgny, about Father Le Vazeux's rudeness in his

manner of opposing Monsieur Ventadour's community, by finding "some means of maintaining our little Congregation, imagining that its preservation depends on the destruction of others." As Vincent tells Le Vazeux, "It would be better to have a hundred ventures under the name of 'Missions,' even were they prejudicial to our institute, than for us to have thwarted one good one, such as his, under the pretext of maintaining ourselves."

Thus Vincent was not simply possessive of a name for his Congregation, but he was protective of its integrity and reputation. Experience taught him that, unless the titles of these contemporary communities were clearly distinguished from each other, the identity of his own Congregation would be blurred, and, consequently, the bishops, clergy, and people would lose faith in this good work that providence had begun and he and his missionaries had worked so hard to make flourish.

April, 1993

Christmas Compassion



Compassion is a year-round virtue, but in time it tends to lose its impulse and to fade. An extreme instance of this decline has happened in our own day. Someone has recently coined the expression, "compassion fatigue," to describe the weariness that people have felt from the relentless emergency appeals that have come for refugees and for victims of hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. Whatever the reason for the deficiency, whether overload or indifference, compassion does seem to enjoy a revival during the Christmas season among all people of good will.

Vincent de Paul was a great model of compassion, but he did not limit its practice to Christmastide, even though he too must have felt the weariness. In any event, this season is a good time to recall some of the saint's thoughts on the virtue.

Compassion begins at home, as it were, where we have first received it from God. "Think for a moment," he told his confreres, "of how much we ourselves stand in need of mercy, we who must exercise it toward others." Compassion begins in our hearts, which we must open "so that they become responsive to the sufferings and miseries of the neighbor. We should pray God to give us a true spirit of mercy, which is in truth the spirit of God. The Church says that it is the nature of God to be merciful and to confer this spirit upon us."

Our outward demeanor, said Vincent, should reflect our inner attitude, like that of Jesus, for instance, who wept over the coming fate of Jerusalem. Or in personal address to the neighbor: "We should use compassionate language to make our neighbors aware that we truly have their interests and sufferings at heart." Finally, there should be action, "as much as we can to bring about a partial or complete end to their sufferings, for the hand must be directed as much as possible by the heart." Vincent's biographer, Louis Abelly, observed this body language in the saint: "When people would speak to him about some particular misery or necessity of the poor, he would sigh, close his eyes, and hunch his shoulders like a person weighed down with sufferings. His face would reveal the deep suffering by which

he shared in the misfortunes of the poor.”

Vincent continued, encouraging his missionaries to wear this badge of recognition: “Ask this grace of God, that he may give us this spirit of compassion and mercy, and that he may so fill us with it that as soon as anyone sees a missionary, he immediately will think, there goes a person full of compassion.” One can never feel satisfied that he has done enough. “Our entire lives are but a moment, soon gone.” Even Vincent lamented in his own case: “Alas, the seventy-six years of my life seem now only a momentary dream. What remains now is only the regret that I have used this time so poorly. Think of what unhappiness we will have at the moment of our death if we have not used this brief time of our lives to show mercy to others.” The lesson, he told his brothers, is “never meet a poor person without seeking to console him, or an uneducated person without seeking to help him understand, in a few words, what he must believe and do to assure his salvation. O savior [he prayed]...do not withdraw from this Company the spirit of mercy.”

The operative word in Vincent’s thinking here is heart. It is the heart that the misery of others first touches. It is the heart so moved that springs into action, especially with the prior realization that God has first touched it with his compassion. It is the heart that continues to sense the needs of others and to keep the charity of Christ alive, not only at Christmastide but throughout the whole year.

December, 1995

The Deaths of Missionaries



*T*he recent death of a beloved Vincentian priest, Harold Persich, C.M. evokes some thoughts from Saint Vincent on the deaths of his confreres. Over the years the saint parted company with many of his missionaries: some who left the Congregation for another mode of life and others who departed in death. There was a single theme that he repeatedly sounded at the news of death.

Speaking of Louis Lebreton, a man of “marvelous great works,” Vincent was able to say with hope: “I think that this holy man will do more in heaven than he was able to accomplish on earth. He will be like a host offered to God and consumed for his Church, who will intercede for us in heaven and obtain the blessings necessary for this undertaking.”

There was one occasion in 1657 when Vincent had to announce the news of eleven confreres recently felled in death — three by sickness on the way to Madagascar and eight by serving the plague-stricken in Genoa. These ten priests and a lay brother died “in actual service of their neighbor and in a most holy and wonderful manner.” There are, he said, “so many missionaries whom we now have in heaven; there is no room to doubt that all of them sacrificed themselves out of charity, and there is no greater charity than that of giving one’s life for one’s neighbor...If then we have lost on the one hand, we have gained on the other, inasmuch as it has pleased God to glorify our confreres, as we have reason to believe. Moreover, the ashes of these apostolic men will be the seed of a great number of good missionaries.”

Unless sustained by this hope, Vincent was convinced, “we could not meet with a greater sorrow without being utterly crushed by it.”

December, 1989

The Death of Vincent



The Year 1660 saw the convergence of events that neatly, if sadly, brought to a close the opening chapter of the Vincentian story. Early on, Vincent's lifelong friend and co-worker, Anthony Portail, fell on 14 February, followed a month later, on 15 March, by Louise de Marillac, Vincent's collaborator in charity. The sequence culminated in the death of the saint himself on 27 September. Although Vincent and Louise acknowledged their terminal conditions, they encouraged each other's hope. As late as January of her final year, Louise chided Vincent: "I think [your health] would improve if you would let yourself be treated as you would command someone else to be treated." As the inevitability of Louise's end was apparent, Vincent recognized the imminence of his own and sent her the message, "You are going before me. I shall be following you soon."

Because sickness laid him low so many times in the past, even with the threat of death once or twice, Vincent was at home with the thought of death. To a priest who had fretted about Vincent's precarious condition, the saint gave him this reassurance, "I have not gone to bed for the last eighteen years without placing myself in a state to appear before God in the morning."

Vincent's impending death became a quasi-public event. Convents of religious offered a steady stream of prayers for him. Others made inquiries, and prominent personages sought to have a final visit. His attendants elicited his final blessings for his disciples and constituents — his missionaries and Daughters, the Ladies of Charity, the foundlings, the poor, his benefactors and friends, the priests of the Tuesday Conferences. Although Vincent did not deny his pain, he turned the solicitude of his visitors back upon them, seeking to comfort them and to downplay his own condition. "Our Lord suffered more than I do," he told them.

At the end, the rituals for the dying, and the accompanying agitation of his attendants, continued into the night of 26 September until the early hours of the next morning. Then, at about 4:00 A.M., Vincent's life began to ebb, and by 4:45 A.M. he had

breathed his last, the name JESUS floating on his final breath. As Coste described the peaceful scene: "He died in his chair, close to the fire, fully dressed, and without a struggle. Death, far from disfiguring his features, seemed to have endowed him with a beauty and majesty that amazed all who were privileged to look upon his countenance."

August, 1990

Celebrating Vincent's Death



"Now will I praise those godly men, our ancestors, each in his own time." (Sirach 44:1)

(The recent death and funeral of Father James W. Richardson, C.M., former superior general, and the honors paid him on the occasion recall the death and celebrations after the death of his predecessor, Vincent de Paul, whose anniversary we remember on 27 September.)

In death Vincent de Paul passed beyond the restraints to which his humility had held him. No longer could he ward off or discount compliments about his personal virtue or his achievements. Admirers were free to heap praise without limits. Then, too, so widespread was the admiration for these accomplishments that a single memorial in his honor seemed hardly sufficient to accommodate the various constituencies whom he served and who wished to pay him tribute.

Because the saint died early on the morning of the 27th, it was possible for his confreres to make swift preparations for the public so that the rest of the day and the night hours were available for all manner of friends and admirers to visit. "By morning," Coste reported, "the whole of Paris had learned the sad news, and visitors began to arrive in streams: great lords and ladies, presidents of the parlement, bishops, priests, members of religious orders of men and women, and laymen of all conditions, filed by the bed on the which the body lay." The funeral in the church of Saint-Lazare, which took place on the 28th, likewise drew a similar army: papal representatives, bishops, pastors, and great numbers of people. Even after the burial, the flow of mourners to the tomb continued for days, including, says Coste, "numbers of sick and infirm attracted there in the hope of obtaining a cure."

In addition to the personal visits, there was an abundance of other of tributes that arrived at Saint-Lazare from a wide range of friends. The messages came from high Church and civic officials, from royalty, from pastors. Coste cites one of these, from a priest, which seemed to echo the common sentiments of all: "I had the

honor of knowing Monsieur Vincent for the last thirty years. I have never seen anything in him that was not great and holy. I have always regarded him as an apostolic man, filled with the spirit of God, in a word, as a saint of our time in whom all virtues were combined in an eminent degree."

Apart from the main, official celebration there were many others — at cathedrals around the nation, at parish churches and religious houses. There was one particularly appropriate memorial that was held several weeks after his death — on 23 November — sponsored by the priests of the Tuesday Conference to honor their founder. The event was postponed to allow the speaker time to prepare his sermon. The speaker on the occasion, once again attracting a large gathering of "prelates, clergy, religious, and an enormous gathering of other people," was Henri de Maupas du Tour, bishop of Le Puy, who, Abelly reported, "could not say all he wanted, even though he spoke for over two hours, [the bishop claiming that] his subject was so vast he would have required a whole lenten series to do it justice." Although the sermon contained "some fine passages," it was a pity, Coste observed, with a hint of pique, that Bossuet could not have been the preacher: "The greatest hero of charity certainly deserved to have his praises proclaimed by the greatest of Christian orators."

When death did arrive for Vincent, she came as a guest long expected. Abelly described the saint's composure, as he awaited the end, "in a profound sense of peace and in an undisturbed frame of mind...He had only to be seen shortly before his death, so afflicted with various ills that he was watching himself dying, as he expressed it, but still with no discernible change in his exterior demeanor except for weakness and gradual wasting away." It was a natural setting of watchfulness, the saint, "as always, seated in his chair, fully clothed tending to the affairs of the community as was his custom. His spirit changed even less than his body, and remained calm and tranquil until the last moment."

For Vincent this was an habitual attitude of resignation. He felt no need to make any extraordinary preparation for death. "For the last eighteen years," he once told a confrere who wondered about the saint's failing health, "I have never gone to bed without putting myself into the disposition to appear before God that very night." It is not surprising, therefore, to hear his response, "with a smile," to someone who remarked about his prolonged sleeping during those last days: It was "the brother coming to meet the sister," which to Abelly meant "sleep as the brother awaiting sister death." That meeting finally took place on 27 September 1660.

November, 1990